

Creating Community: Art on the Brain/Vets at the Wex/ CATCH Collaboration



Origins

Piloted in 2013, *Art on the Brain* was inspired by my existing gallery teaching practice and observations.

Guided gallery experiences are created using an inquiry-based process, based on Lev Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory.

I wondered, "What more is possible? Who can this help?"

My pilot group came to me through the support of Wexner Medical Center, Nationwide Children's Hospital, and Ohio Health.



What do we do?

- We (10-15 people) meet weekly for 8 sessions.
- We deeply explore contemporary arts. (visual, dance, music, etc.)
- We work as a group to construct meaning.
- We learn and practice principals of mindfulness and intentional self-acceptance.
- Loved ones and care-givers participate alongside the “injured”.
- We hold each other in dignity.



Why Contemporary Art?



- It levels the playing field... No one understands it at first.
- Interpretation of the work can be somewhat subjective. Once that's understood, it relieves a lot of pressure. The ambiguity can be freeing.
- It explores the contemporary human experience.
- It's complex! It creates a wonderful, stimulus-rich platform.

Contemporary art is “conceptual”, meaning that it's steeped in ideas and opinions. It's a visual mode of communication that requires decoding through:

Perception
Affective Response
Analytical Reasoning



Once we make peace with our confusion, we engage the art using:

- Our bodies: That gut reaction
- Our emotions: “I feel creeped out.”
- Our problem solving minds: “This looks like a freaky horror movie church...what’s going on??”

Observations and Learning

- I began this program with my attention focused on my basic understanding of cognition and injury... aphasia, executive function, memory, etc...
- A few key moments began to change how I view this program.



The experiences are novel and weird, so a mental challenge is inherent. However...

- People began to share their stories.
- They confided if they felt unheard or alone.
- They shared their victories.
- They started holding each other accountable.
- It was powerful to witness. So...I wondered “What more is possible?”



“This is good for me. I have to play nicely with others.” Art on the Brain Participant

“I liked that each individual opened up and felt comfortable to share very private things.” Art on the Brain Participant

Vets at the Wex: 2016- Present



"This thing is demented. I hate it!"
Vets at the Wex Participant

*"I wish I had a giant scar on my face so
people can see that I'm not totally ok."*
Vets at the Wex Participant

CATCH: Summer 2017



"What the hell is that? Let's go look at it."

"I was not comfortable at all with art. Now I know to just start with looking at a piece. I can ask, 'what do I see?' and then, 'how do I interpret that?' It is all about sharing your perspective."

"I never really had an understanding of art before. Now I see that it involves lots of people's stories."

"You guys are really hospitable."

What does it seem to support?

- A collaborative learning process
- Social integration and a sense of community
- Broadened Thinking
- A sense of agency and self acceptance
- A platform to share and process experiences and feelings
- Acceptance of ambiguity
- Basic enjoyment and fun



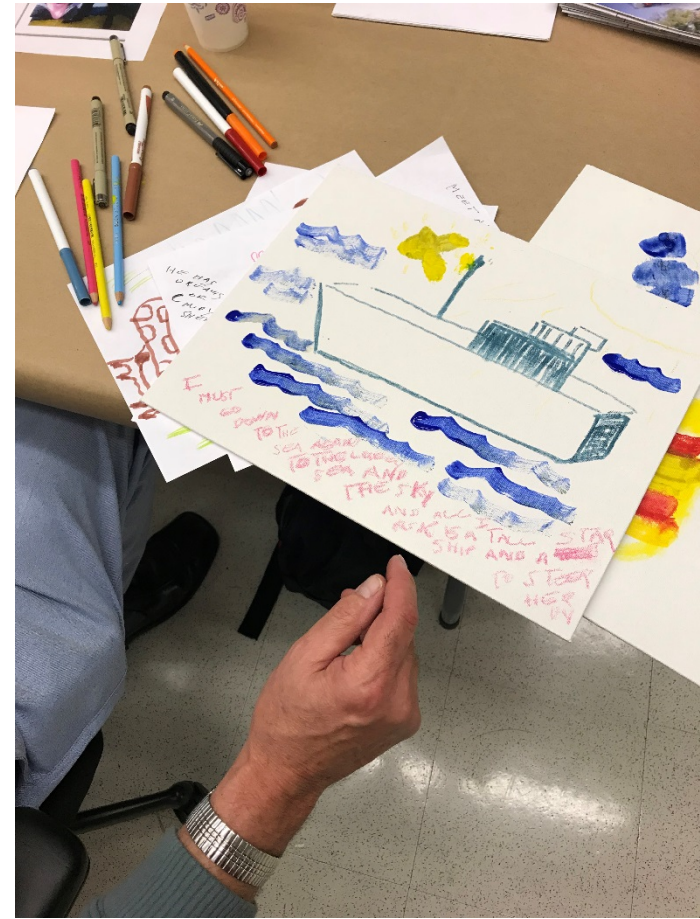
"I like things that pushed my boundaries. The writing was really uncomfortable, but then I realized, it is okay to be self-conscious. You just have to get something on paper, and that's okay." Vets at the Wex Participant



"The musicians and dancers were great because I don't see those types of things enough. I enjoy those things but I don't get out to see them. I am hoping to get my daughter out with me to see stuff in the city."

Vets at the Wex Participant

"I never realized before how heavy my chest feels when I'm sad." Art on the Brain Participant



“For me, this is really outside my comfort zone. There were things I really enjoyed. I think this woman (gestures to Sherman’s work) is a wacko. Most of her work is crap in the bucket. The thing I went through is just me shutting down. I want to get to know people, but I just don’t put myself out there. I didn’t want to come here. But she really did (his wife).” Vets at the Wex Participant



“It’s crazy how we see such different things. Someone might look at this and just see ugly, sad women. It reminds me of when they show ladies in the paper who got arrested for solicitation. People see them and they see garbage. And I’m like, “Fuck you. I know some of them. They’re my friends. They have names.” That frog is a John. No one usually shows his face in the papers.” CATCH participant



“I could easily (mentally escape) by watching TV. It’s more about getting other feedback on stuff. Thinking differently, hearing someone else’s point of view, which to me is really important. It’s the key to being alive. I get sick of hearing my own view.”

Art on the Brain Participant



“You pushed (my) limitations and expanded my appreciation of every aspect of our world. I now observe the world in a different light.” Art on the Brain Participant



What more is possible?

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Works by Appearance

1. Element spatial (Spatial Element)

By Elsi Giaque, 1979

2. Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column

By Sheila Hicks, 2013-14

3. Multicolored Portrait

By George Condo, 1990

4. Rags and Old Iron (After Nina Simone)

By Noah Purifoy, 1989

5. From Asterisks in Dockery

By Rodney McMillian, 2012

6. from Family Pictures and Stories, 1981–1982

By Carrie Mae Weems

7. from *Blues for Smoke*

Untitled

By Mark Bradford, 2012

**8. from *Leap Before you Look:
Black Mt College 1933-1957***

Shortstop

By John Chamberlain, 1958

9. Betrayal

By Marlene Dumas, 1994

**10. from Cindy Sherman:
Imitation of Life**

Untitled #209, #215, #207

By Cindy Sherman, 1989